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ABSTRACT

Multicultural education is still a relatively new trend in the American system of higher education. As with any new pedagogy, there is a tendency to reduce the genuine possibility of educational reform to mere superficiality--good intentions lacking substance. Behind the "camouflage" of politically correct language and actions, individuals need not admit their attitudes of racism, sexism, and classism. In contrast, multiculturalism seeks to acknowledge such attitudes by providing a space where open dialogue and learning can occur. Assuming that multiculturalism is a worthwhile goal, then the role of teacher takes on a new meaning--teachers are called to become cultural reformers. As educators become aware of various learning styles and possible tendencies among specific cultures or groups, they can make adjustments to accommodate a variety of learners. Changes can be made within a dramatic literature course for undergraduate theater majors and minors. Areas of concern in discovering an individual teaching style that conforms to the needs of multicultural education are: including variety in the classroom, which recognizes different learning styles; developing a classroom democracy; and posing questions concerning culture and human relationships. Some possibilities for teaching dramatic literature are: student-led discussions of play texts; student presentations on cultures represented in the texts; in-class readings of dramatic texts; student panel discussions concerning issues within the text; and student journals to be shared periodically with the class. (Contains 11 references.) (CR)

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Beyond the Popular and Politically Correct: Multicultural Education and the Reform of Theatre Pedagogy

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Multicultural education is still a relatively new trend in the American system of higher education. As with any new pedagogical approach, there is a tendency to reduce the genuine possibility of educational reform to mere superficiality: good intentions lacking substance. Multicultural education is no exception. Despite the pressing need for a curriculum which includes the vast array of cultural differences found in this country and the world, decidedly cynical "experts" minimize its importance, by pushing multiculturalism under the label, "political correctness."

In order to separate what I believe are two very different ideals, it is important to define both multiculturalism and political correctness. Ideally, the term multiculturalism will become more deeply defined and developed throughout this paper. However, to provide a starting point, bell hooks refers to multiculturalism as:

> The call for a recognition of cultural diversity, a rethinking of ways of knowing, a deconstruction of old epistemologies, and the concomitant demand that there be a transformation in our classrooms, in how we teach and what we teach . . . . (30-31)

The call for change advocated by hooks is in direct opposition to political correctness, as Velina Hasu Houston would agree. Houston, another supporter of cultural diversity, pinpoints the radically different goals of political correctness when she write, "The right presents political correctness as a demon created by the liberal left, when in reality it is mere camouflage for their own self-defense" (15-16). In other words, Houston sees political correctness as a form of denial. By hiding behind the "camouflage" of politically correct language and actions, individuals need not admit their attitudes of racism, sexism, and classism. In contrast, Multiculturalism seeks

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to acknowledge such attitudes by providing a space where open dialogue and learning can occur.

At the heart of multicultural education, then, are the questions posed concerning culture and how human beings understand and relate--or fail to relate--to one another. True commitment to cultural diversity requires this type of transformation: one that begins at the heart of the curriculum and extends outward. The superficial camouflaging of old curriculum by adding one or two "minority" works or authors does not encourage transformation--although it may be a small move toward something greater. In order for *something greater* to occur, however, educators need to acknowledge the difference between multiculturalism and political correctness.

Multiculturalism has been embraced by some areas of education more readily than others, it seems. Theatre education, a discipline in which most educators are committed to human understanding, has tried in many instances to facilitate multicultural learning. Yet, even among theatre experts there is a hesitancy to commit to the ideals of cultural diversity. Robert Brustein makes his position concerning multiculturalism all too clear in *Dumbocracy in America*, when he states: "political correctness, masquerading as multiculturalism, has proceeded to harass the world of serious art" (67). Embarrassingly, Brustein plays into the hands of outraged Americans who feel threatened by the notion that cultural pluralism will "demolish our traditional [read *Western*] standards and values" (Brustein 66).

Brustein may be guilty of making unfair generalizations, however he does bring up an interesting point. Though far from being a subversive form of political correctness, multiculturalism can be used--and I mean *used* in the cheapening sense--with less than genuine intentions. Brustein's attack brings into focus, then, the need for an examination of the *ways* in which multiculturalism is used in theatre pedagogy. After exploring the issues of cultural diversity and education, I have hit upon three

prevailing attitudes toward multicultural pedagogy: 1) Castigation, 2) Correctness, and 3) Commitment.

The first attitude, "Castigation," is a zealous rejection of multicultural education. According to bell hooks, to some educators cultural diversity means the "possible loss of 'authority,'" (30) a prospect which many are loathe to accept. Educators who castigate multiculturalism are reacting to a "deep-seated . . . fear that any de-centering of Western civilizations, of the white male canon, is really an act of cultural genocide" (hooks 32). Although the castigation of cultural diversity is unfortunate, the second attitude, "Correctness," is perhaps even more dangerous.

Correctness--more commonly phrased "political correctness"--involves a patronizing attitude toward multiculturalism. Educators who subscribe to correctness are careful to include one or two "marginal" dramatic texts or theorists within a course, but refrain from fully investing a sense of cultural diversity within their teaching practices. Included among the strategies of such practitioners is an attitude which exoticizes non-Western cultures. Even if the intention of including a sparse assortment of multicultural material does not demean it as exotic, hooks asserts that "tokenism is not multicultural transformation, but it is familiar to us as the change individuals are most likely to make" (38). Educators who practice correctness opt for the easy answer, and in doing so, retain ineffectual pedagogical strategies.

Although Brustein claims that multiculturalism is a misnomer for political correctness, his own definition of "a genuine form of cultural diversity" (25) strictly involves a mere blending of cultures. While blending cultures may be a legitimate strategy of multiculturalism, when it becomes the *appropriation* of culture, blending falls into the category of exploitation. Not surprisingly, Brustein accuses artists who promote specific cultures of behaving in a culturally biased manner--a typically Eurocentric activity which Brustein fails to acknowledge. (That is not to say that the

separatists who promote exclusively one culture--no matter what that culture is--are practicing true multiculturalism.) Further, Brustein advocates a brand of multiculturalism that smacks suspiciously of political correctness:

> Fundamental to multiculturalism is the idea that civilizations flourish by opening themselves to the impact of outside influences; yet many multicultural artists have been closing themselves to the West on the assumption that the West is closed to them. That assumption is incorrect. Far from being 'insular,' Western civilization has always been a pushover for anything considered even remotely foreign. (20)

By treating other cultures as something "foreign" to Western civilization, he places non-Western cultures in the position of the "other." In keeping other cultures at a distance, Brustein practices the same politically-correct exoticization of cultures he pretends to reject.

In contrast to Brustein's unwitting advocacy of "Correctness," the third prevailing attitude toward multicultural education is one of "Commitment." In an essay entitled, "Arts Literacy across American Culture," Arturo Madrid characterizes true commitment to multiculturalism as the desire "to foster pluralism yet avoid the black hole of particularism, to recognize differences yet seek out commonalities, and to value tradition yet celebrate innovation" (12). As Madrid describes it, multiculturalism is not only an integral strategy within theatre pedagogy, but it becomes, in essence, the basis of pedagogical practice.

Teachers of Theatre as Cultural Reformers

Assuming that multiculturalism--making cultural diversity a central objective of education--is a worthwhile goal, then the role of teacher takes on a new meaning. In a multicultural curriculum, teachers not only function as upholders of European

American culture, but they also "promote greater tolerance, understanding, and appreciation of different cultures within and beyond our own 'mosaic'" (Schuster 20). Judy Schuster aptly asserts that due to rapidly-increasing percentages of non-white students entering the American education system, "Educators today face a redefined agenda that must address issues of race, ethnicity, culture, history, gender, and more" (20). As students reflect a wider variety of cultures, American educators need to adjust to the needs of this new and diverse student population.

One way of responding to the role teachers play in this changing environment is to begin to focus on the "cultural work" that multicultural teaching requires. Roger Simon, in *Teaching Against the Grain*, includes a chapter entitled "Teachers as Cultural Workers." Herein, Simon challenges educators to take responsibility for students' awareness of cultural diversity. Further, Simon proposes that teachers should incite in students:

> a passion that invests with a particular urgency, the challenge to taken-for-granted social truths and the struggle for a more just and compassionate moral order capable of sustaining the diversity of life which inhabits our planet. (Simon 55)

Simon's proposal, it seems to me, challenges teachers to be more than mere cultural workers. His charge--with its inherent focus on a need for change--effectively calls teachers to become cultural *reformers*.

Teachers have always been individuals who affect students lives, whether adversely or in profoundly positive ways. Yet, few educators have pursued teaching as a means of cultural reformation. Judy Schuster maintains that "the resistance [to change] is not because teachers refuse to incorporate multiculturalism into their teaching; it's that they think they're already doing it" (21). Although most educators do have good intentions, we still tend to teach what we have been taught. Inevitably,

when what we have been taught is limited to European, white, male history, theories, and literature, reformation does not occur.

In response to the apparent need for change across pedagogical lines, Richard Schechner has charged teachers of theatre in much the same way Simon charges all educators. Schechner calls for a fundamental change in the goals and objectives of theatre departments as a whole. Asserting that teachers of theatre are particularly valuable cultural reformers, he describes the reason for their specialness:

> Performance engages intellectual, social, cultural, historical, and artistic life in a broad sense. Performance combines theory and practice. Performance studied and practiced interculturally can be at the core of a 'well-rounded education.' That is because performed acts, whether actual or virtual, more than the written word, connect and negotiate the many cultural, personal, group, regional, and world systems comprising today's realities. (Schechner 9)

Because performance is a medium capable of including and communicating to people of all cultures, Schechner contends that theatre education should be the very locus of reform. Further, Schechner urges theatre educators--or cultural reformers--to use performance and its related elements as tools to facilitate discussion and learning about cultures.

But how does a teacher become a cultural reformer? Is it possible, in the overpopulated classrooms across America to make the kind of difference that will cause education to become "the practice of freedom" envisioned by bell hooks (4)? While I do not intend to oversimplify the complex social and political conditions which affect pedagogy--particularly when dramatic transformations occur within the curriculum--the impetus for pedagogical change must begin somewhere. The first step toward reform, as cliché as it may sound, is to acknowledge the need for change. Affirming this notion, hooks maintains:

> If the effort to respect and honor the social reality and experiences of groups in this society who are nonwhite is to be reflected in a pedagogical process, then as teachers--on all levels, from elementary to university settings--we must acknowledge that our styles of teaching may need to change. (35)

Favorite, though ineffective, practices may need to go. Fresh, new material will need to be researched. Perhaps most disarming, the teacher as the voice of absolute authority may need to learn the beauty of silence. This and much more is required if we are to "[make] the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute" (hooks 39).

The democratic classroom hooks describes can only be achieved when educators are willing to evaluate their teaching styles and adapt to changing needs of students. Providing some eye-opening statistics, Judy Schuster emphasizes the student population who reflects these changing needs. In an article entitled "Multicultural Education: Responding to the Demographics of Change," she notes: "By the year 2050, descendants of the 'new' immigrants--non-whites--are expected to represent 40 percent of the country's population" (20). Statistics like these strongly emphasize the need for educators to reflect on our changing student population and the variety of learners this group encompasses. As educators become aware of various learning styles and possible tendencies among specific cultures or groups, they can make adjustments to accommodate a variety of learners.

Multicultural Strategies in Dramatic Literature

This essay cannot begin to address the changes necessary to make the transition from traditional strategies to a multicultural theatre pedagogy. However, I will focus on changes that can be made within a dramatic literature course for undergraduate theatre majors and minors. My examples will be geared toward

dramatic literature, but many of the following suggestions are useful for additional courses in theatre, as well as other disciplines.

In any course, it seems logical to begin by examining the content. Dramatic literature is traditionally viewed as a chance for theatre departments to expose students to the "seminal" works, many of which have shaped theatre history. In a course entitled "Modern Drama," for example, the syllabus might include such works as *A Doll's House*, by Henrik Ibsen, *Miss Julie*, by August Strindberg, and *The Cherry Orchard*, by Anton Chekhov. This traditional approach to dramatic literature, though common, "[does] little to reflect the contributions of women and of non-European races and cultures" (Houston 16).

In *The Politics of Life*, Velina Hasu Houston challenges the dramatic literary canon which measures playwrights by "the Great Eurocentric Yardstick," (7) a practice in which primarily white European males have decided what constitutes a significant text. Houston recognizes the need to transform the content of dramatic literature courses in order to reflect the rich cultural diversity of America and the world. Although Houston seeks to reform the content of such courses, she is not suggesting that all European plays be banned from "the canon." She seeks a curriculum which would allow dramatic literature of all cultures "to coexist . . . with integrity and fairness" (15). This must be the goal of a dramatic literature course truly committed to the spirit of multiculturalism.

Assuming that cultural diversity should be the foundation of a genuinely multicultural curriculum, then a course entitled "17th Century Drama" would automatically include texts from a variety of cultural perspectives. Such a course need not be labeled "multicultural," since the commitment to cultural diversity is inherent in the course, and not merely superficial--as labels often are. The question then becomes "What if there aren't any significant contributions by other cultures during the 17th century?" Although this is a valid question given our lack of exposure

to other cultures, over the past thirty years, feminist theorists have managed to uncover the texts of countless women writers whose works--often of high quality--were not deemed worthy of mention by historians. This wealth of new texts certainly isn't limited to women writers of the past. Dramatic texts from a wide variety of cultures do exist; educators need only make an effort to pursue these untapped resources.

Like the "17th Century Drama" course mentioned above, some of my examples might extend beyond the limits of one particular course. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will focus the bulk of my analysis on a fictional course entitled "Contemporary Dramatic Literature." Potential offerings in such a course might be chosen from among the following plays: *Angels in America, Spell #7, Asa Ga Kamashita, M. Butterfly, Dancing at Lughnasa, Fires in the Mirror, Giving Up the Ghost, Black Elk Speaks, Joe Turner's Come and Gone, Spics!, Boseman and Lena, Auschwitz, The Conduct of Life, What of the Night, Artist Descending a Staircase, Top Girls, The Heidi Chronicles, Our Country's Good, Les Liaisons Dangereuses, Fen, The Well of Horniness, Fences, Buried Child, Death and the Maiden*, and so on. Obviously, there are many other plays which would be equally suited to such a course; even the plays listed above would need to be pared down in order to fit into a semester-long course. Although I will not include supplemental material here, a variety of related articles could potentially--and I believe, should--accompany the plays.

The plays chosen for such a course should not just include a wide variety of cultures, but dramatic texts should also "expose students to the range of themes that can be found in ethnic literature" (Stotsky 37). Rather than depicting ethnic characters solely in scenarios characterized by discrimination or exploitation, these plays should encompass a wide array of situations and themes. For instance, including *Driving Miss Daisy* as the sole example of a play which includes an African-American character drastically limits a discussion of race relations. Of the plays I

have suggested, some of the issues addressed are: race relations, the meaning of class, abuse of power, colonialism, the holocaust, and minstrel shows to name just a few. Providing students with plays that cover a wide range of issues is a valuable part of facilitating a culturally diverse curriculum.

In "All of Us Have Come to America," Sandra Stotsky brings up another important point concerning ethnic literature and course content. She maintains that students "should also be able to see members of different ethnic and racial groups as leading characters in what they read, so that . . . they have opportunities to identify with all types of human beings" (Stotsky 34). All cultural experiences should be seen, at some point, through the eyes of the central characters in dramatic texts. So while a course might include *Driving Miss Daisy*, it should also include a text like *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, which places African-American characters and culture at the center of the action. When such characters are depicted solely within the dominant white culture, they are not central, but remain marginalized in course content.

Content is only the first issue which must be addressed in order to devise a curriculum that is culturally diverse. Teaching style and course assignments comprise an equally important pedagogical area. In fact, without a complementary teaching style, multicultural content does little to enhance a course. James Anderson describes the need for multicultural teaching strategies in "Cognitive Styles and Multicultural Populations." He contends:

> that new models and approaches must evolve which not only deal with debilitating misconceptions about minorities, but, more important, also operate within a framework of equal respect and appreciation for the similarities and differences among groups. (8)

Areas of particular concern in discovering an individual teaching style that conforms to the needs of multicultural education are: including variety in the classroom, which

involves recognizing different learning styles; developing a classroom democracy; and posing questions concerning culture and human relationships.

The posing of questions is vital to any dramatic literature course, regardless of content. In a course based on multicultural content, questions become extremely valuable. Not only does commitment to multicultural education mean the inclusion of "marginal" plays which depart from the accepted "canon," but it also means close examination of those texts. Even when traditional works remain a part of the literature course, the instructor must be able to pose valuable questions.

In an article entitled "Shakespeare for the 1990s: a Multicultural Tempest," Allen Carey-Webb provides an example of how an instructor might provide students with a revised view of traditional content . Pointing out that "well-known texts of the 'canon' can be reexamined and can serve as entry points to issues of race, gender, and culture," (34) Carey-Webb remarks:

> *The Tempest* Addresses the relationship of European and non-European people that has shaped the world since Columbus, and it offers students the opportunity to reflect on the multicultural origins of American culture in particularly relevant ways" (30).

By viewing *The Tempest* in a non-traditional way and acknowledging the context of the play's events, Carey-Webb is able to lead students to new ideas about an old text. Perhaps most importantly, by posing questions like--What does it means to colonize? To be colonized?--in relation to the text, students may develop the critical skills to question other traditional works. Though not a replacement for including plays from other cultures in a course, the revision of "great works" described by Carey-Webb is certainly one way of posing valuable questions about dramatic literature.

Another equally important aspect of question-posing is to encourage students to ask questions. In many classrooms, students are taught to listen and let the instructor ask the "important" questions. Such dependence on the instructor can

lead to fear of questioning authority, or worse, thoughts about questioning authority never enter the student's mind.

Literature instructor, Gail Reisin elicits questions from her students by asking them to choose a part of the text they particularly like. The students read these excerpts for the class in a session which becomes a collage of favorite passages. Reisin contends that this "text-rendering experience [funnels] students' attention toward key phrases, those classic resonant lines that teachers traditionally 'tell' students to appreciate" (Reisin 52). By allowing students to find key passages themselves, Reisin found they were able to confront questions central to the text independently, thus internalizing themes and ideas more fully.

The process of internalization is especially important to a curriculum committed to multicultural education. It is only by posing pertinent questions about race, sex, class, and gender, and by drawing meaningful parallels among cultures, that ideas are internalized. A dramatic literature course based in cultural diversity should address one particular issue no matter how many "ethnic" texts are included in the course, or how many students of color are enrolled: the study of "whiteness." According to bell hooks:

> it is . . . crucial that 'whiteness' be studied, understood, discussed--so that everyone learns that affirmation of multiculturalism, and an unbiased inclusive perspective, can and should be present whether or not people of color are present. (43)

Just as non-white cultures are studied for the purpose of understanding cultural differences, white culture should also be analyzed and discussed. Without an honest evaluation of what it means to be white in a culture that favors white-skinned individuals, the issues inherent in the texts studied will not carry the same meaning.

Confronting such issues as whiteness, and pinpointing questions concerning race, gender, and sexual identity within the dramatic texts will strengthen the

classroom democracy necessary to multicultural education. Yet, even when classrooms discussions of dramatic literature are meant to be sincere and productive, educators and students can fall into the trap of tokenism. Tokenism occurs, as bell hooks cautions "if there is one lone person of color in the classroom [and] she or he is objectified by others and forced to assume the role of 'native informant'" (43). In a classroom democracy, although every person is equal, it is still the instructor's responsibility to ensure that such scenarios do not occur. Likewise, when students do turn to the lone Native American in the group for perspective concerning a Native American text, it is the professor's position to remind students that it is just *one* perspective. Inherent in a true democracy is the idea that individuals are not only equal, but each has her or his own perspective based upon individual life experience.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of such a classroom environment is that it assumes nothing. Still, critics of multicultural education often suggest that proponents of cultural diversity make similar generalizations to those made by mainstream culture. Multiculturalism becomes a competition: at stake is ultimate control of the canon of dramatic literature, as a way of demonstrating whose voice is more important. Arguing that such polarism is surmountable, Madrid contends: "We can set standards that are neither exclusivist nor elitist. We can be inclusive without falling into relativism" (12).

Madrid makes a valid point. In order to avoid both relativism and elitism, an area of balance must be found. One way of achieving a balance in a "Contemporary Dramatic Literature" course like the one I have outlined, is to encourage honest dialogue. Although promoting a greater understanding of cultures is a primary goal of such a course, another goal should be the critique of dramatic texts and cultural practices. For example, in a reading of *Asa Ga Kamashita*, American intervention in Japan, though treated somewhat favorably in the text, would also need to be examined for its negative aspects. Likewise, the instructor of such a course would

need to acknowledge the inherent limitations of studying only a modest number of texts and cultures, making it clear that the study of three or five cultures does not provide adequate insight into other cultures.

As teachers implement multicultural strategies, the truth of multiculturalism becomes apparent. Multicultural education, on both emotional and intellectual levels, is not easy. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks reminds educators that a culturally diverse curriculum forces students and teachers alike, to face issues we would rather ignore. Although this type of teaching can be painful, hooks acknowledges that the "one way to build community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice" (hooks 40). As individual voices are heard and difficult issues raised, the sense of community fostered in the classroom can be extended to life outside the classroom, little by little.

Practical Possibilities for Dramatic Literature

Although I have discussed a variety of philosophical issues and some specific examples of a multicultural curriculum in dramatic literature, I would like to focus more specifically on potential course activities. One of the most highly valued qualities of multicultural education seems to be the need for variety. Because "different cultures produce different learning styles" (Anderson 4), a variety of approaches to learning will help to accommodate the culturally-diverse student population which grows more diverse each year. Traditionally, dramatic literature courses are approached in keeping with a lecture/discussion format. Certainly both lecture and discussion are important components of any literature course, but can dramatic literature be taught in other ways?

Since variety is one of the main thrusts of multicultural course content, activities within the course should be equally diverse to reach all types of learners. Listed below are just some of the possibilities for teaching dramatic literature:

- Student-led discussions of play texts.
- Student presentations on culture(s) represented in the text.
- In-class readings of dramatic texts.
- Prepared performances of scenes from play texts by students in the class.
- Student panel discussions concerning issues within the text (i.e. racism)
- Small-group discussions of themes and images within a text.
- Student journals to be shared, periodically with the class.
- Creative responses to play texts in the form of performance pieces, essays, comic books, or poems.

The above list merely scratches the surface of possible activities which might be included in a dramatic literature course. Of particular interest is the notion that dramatic literature does not require a static teaching environment in which the teacher talks and students listen. As Schechner affirms, "it is not only a question of studying different cultures from a scholarly perspective, but of seeing and doing rituals, dramas, celebrations, and festivals from Africa, Asia, Europe, Native America, and Latin America" (9). Performance enhances the understanding of cultural material, since performance is a universal element of all cultures.

For example, when the "Contemporary Dramatic Literature" course focuses on a text like *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, students might be encouraged to report on the African "juju" dance. One group may venture to prepare a performance involving African dance. Another group might debate the religious themes inherent in the text in a mock-debate between the characters of Harold Loomis and Martha Pentacost. Student questions and areas of interest should help to develop the curriculum of such a course, which means the possibilities are endless.

Although the prospect of such dramatic change is frightening for some educators, what these new possibilities mean to education is not the loss of white, Anglo culture. It means the inclusion of cultures in our quest to learn. Roger Simon defines multicultural education as a "pedagogy of possibility, one that works for the reconstruction of social imagination in the service of human freedom" (4). In dramatic literature and all areas of theatre, the goal of a culturally diverse curriculum is "helping young people find their own cultural 'voice' through drama and . . . helping them understand the voices of their peers in our multicultural society" (Wright 36). The realization of this goal does not require a loss of culture. Rather, it requires a commitment to multiple cultures and multiple voices.

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